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ABSTRACT

A look at Australia's educational history gives insight into a proposal for a domestic communications satellite for use as an educational tool. The country's earliest and most successful distance education programs used itinerant teachers and "tent schools." In 1922, a national correspondence education program was adopted. Correspondence education drew criticism as being impersonal. Later, public radio was used in schools, but was also criticized as being impersonal. The School of the Air, based on limited two-way communication in radio broadcasting, restored some missing human element. After 1961, television became important for teaching science and mathematics in rural areas. In retrospect, the historical trend of rural education in Australia runs against programs that bring teachers into direct contact with students. Instead, the use of mass media is favored. The proposed domestic satellite is seen in this context. Political and economic considerations suggest that programming content will be homogenized and inappropriate for the needs of Australia's rural and Aboriginal population. The apparent lack of necessary time and financial resources for the project's educational component suggests the future enhancement of radio and telephone communication as the primary means of distance education. It is suggested that the country's educational finances might best be spent on improved transportation and citizens-band radio systems. (TES)

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Distance Education and Pupils – From Horseback to Satellite

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Distance Education and Pupils – From Horseback to Satellite

A.H. Higgins

The purpose of this paper is to look briefly at changing modes of rural educational provision to see if anything can be surmised about future changes that will be brought about by an forthcoming domestic communications satellite. The main thrust of the paper is towards teachers providing education to remote places.

Before proceeding, however, it is worthwhile noting that Australia is a highly urbanised country and most of its educational provision is and has been governed by the need to educate a "gathered" society.[1] As a result, educational disadvantage has often been defined, by those with whom one interacts. Poor educational practice exists in both rural and urban places and such disadvantage cannot be defined by location alone.[2]

Various Australian governments, in recognising that all the country's citizens have a right to education, pioneered different methods of provision aimed specifically at rural residents. Each State followed paths similar to other States, consequently we need only look at one to see that patterns that developed through the years in the others. Queensland is this writer's choice partly because the population there is less concentrated than that in the other States and also because Queensland tended to adopt new ideas slowly, thus reflecting the experiences of the other States.

Education in Queensland has two distinct origins, the first in the convict colony of Moreton Bay by Esther Roberts in 1826 and the second on the Darling Downs pastoral settlement at Toolburra in November 1850. George Rusden stimulated the Leslie brothers, George and Patrick, to apply for a National school under the system then existing in N.S.W. (of which Queensland was still a part). Lowe, Wilkins, Rusden and the residents of many small and isolated places long recognised that such settlements could not support more than one small school. Randall MacDonnell, an inspector of schools in Queensland wrote in 1869 that,

"These are cases where the settlers are too few, too far apart or too recently established in their new homes, to be able to comply with the regulations in regard to average attendance (at school) or the contribution to the cost of the school building. In such places the people sometimes contrive, by their united labour, to erect a rough structure... and if they succeed in obtaining the services of a person moderately competent as a instructor, the Board may recognise the school provisionally, and grant a small stipend to the teacher, 'till the time comes when the residents are in a position to contribute their quota of funding a permanent vested school."[3]

This quotation serves to demonstrate that according to the user pays principle, residents in places large or wealthy enough to support a school should have done so, but the Queensland government recognised that many places could not do so and therefore, agreed to fund the recurrent costs of teacher salary and books. Thus, from 1869 to 1901 the Queensland government maintained three educational systems, provisional schools, vested schools and government supported private secondary schools.

The Royal Commission of Inquiry into Educational Institutions of 1874[4] received a report from Mr. D. Cameron about education in Victoria.[5] He noted that Victoria has embarked upon an experiment using itinerant teachers whose purpose it was to visit the most remote pupils and give instruction. Queensland continued to watch this development but did not

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adopt it until 1901. The fundamental characteristic difference between the itinerant system and the provisional/vested schools lay in the recognition that the most remote pupils could not be gathered together in a school and that teachers had to take the school to the pupils. David Ewart, the Chief Inspector of Schools in Queensland at the time opposed the itinerant system and went so far as to institute 'tent' schools in 1908. These were highly portable and cheap and represented and attempt to keep bringing pupils and their teachers together in a place set aside for learning, rather than keeping the pupils separate and dispatching the teachers. nevertheless, the itinerant teacher system flourished, reaching its peak in the First World War, but gradually declining, to be phased out in 1934 as a casualty of the depression economies. The itinerant teachers used horses and traps, but quickly adopted the new technologies of the motor-car and the motor-cycle. The Education Department[6] began its experiments with motors in 1912 and by 1914 the Minister,m H.F. Hardacre realised the high cost of maintenance but determined to continue with the motor-car as a mode of intinerant transport.[7]

The next innovation in Queensland for providing education to children in remote places occurred when the Department adopted the well known and tried system of correspondence education. Queensland used this idea to train its pupil-teachers in 1913 but did not adopt it for general education until 1922.[8] There were several factors giving rise to this type of educational provision and the most obvious was the critical shortage of teachers brought about by the high enlistment and casualty rate of teacher volunteers in the A.I.F. Class numbers rose, women were more commonly employed in teaching, the Departments in all States promoted men to higher positions and this left a shortage of men available to be used as itinerant teachers. The moral and social climate of the time precluded women from taking itinerant jobs. As a result, the various Education Departments chose to maintain education in remote places but they removed the teacher and replaced him with letters and paper. The outcome was a more "efficient" and cheaper system, but it lacked the hum element.

The correspondence system echoed Ewart's distrust of the removal of teachers from the pupils they taught. The introduction of the itinerant system took the schools from the pupils and then the correspondence system took the teachers and substituted a distant and invisible person.

This depersonalisation accelerated with the next innovation in education. Military demands in Word War One improved the use and effectiveness of radio broadcasting. This resulted in two educational advantages, one public and one private. The first had its effect quickly while the second lagged for many years.

Public radio stations began to operate in Queensland in the early 1920's, under rules requiring broadcasters to issue "sealed sets"[9] and later to use A or B class licences. The Education Department supported radio use in schools, and so did the Queensland Teacher's Union, especially in their respective publications between 1926 and 1927. Morven State School was one of the first to use radios in western Queensland.[10] However, by 1928 Frank Fletcher, the Headmaster of Charterhouse school in England wrote to oppose the use of radio for teaching. He claimed that "Broadcasting may impart information; it may bring the schools into touch with the great works of music with the voices of great living men; but it cannot (in the true sense of the word) teach; it cannot educate."[11] Fletcher was both right and wrong. The very contact with the things and people he mentioned was in itself educative but there was no personal interaction involved. The communication was all one-way.

The ruling Australian Labour Party in Queensland lost office in 1929 and an equally conservative Nationalist Party took power. The new Minister for Education claimed in 1930 that "In Australia, no great success has attended attempts to instruct pupils by wireless, and probably little success can be expected if the listeners are primary school pupils."[12] Radio educational broadcasting eventually recommenced. The Education Department organised

formal timetables for school radio in 1937 and co-ordinated its activities with those of the Australian Broadcasting Commission.[13] Radio had its greatest impact among isolated students and their families. This category included those in remote rural places as well as those who for various reasons were unable to attend school in urban places. Social, cultural and sporting programs reached into almost all of Australia, welding the nation together and providing a thorough coverage of current affairs.

The second use of radio for educational purposes included a substantial personal element and that probably accounted for its great success. Alfred Traeger invented a pedal-driven radio transmitter, suitable for use on small stations wishing to call the Royal Flying Doctor Service in the shortwave band. This facility also allowed people on stations to talk to each other, bringing them closer. Miss B. O'Sullivan began broadcasting to 45 pupils from Cloncurry in 1960, thus starting Queensland's School of the Air. The Flying Doctor base moved to Mt Isa in 1964 and the School followed. In the previous year broadcasts also began in Charleville and Charters Towers. The Charters Towers base moved to Cairns in 1972. This is not the place to consider the detailed curriculum of the School of the Air, let it be sufficient to comment that the personal contact between teacher and pupil, even if only for a few minutes each day, restored the human element missing from the correspondence schools, despite that schools' best effort to begin and maintain such contacts.

Australia saw its first mass television broadcasts in 1956. The Australian Broadcasting Commission later used imported British and American education programs but Australia adopted no direct educational teaching until 1961.[14] Science and mathematics curriculum committees developed special programs for television, largely because both America and Australia realised how technologically incompetent they were when compared with the U.S.S.R. The A.B.C. adopted a fully integrated educational policy in 1964, but it saw its main role as one supplementary to other school work. The same year saw the publication of the Weeden Report[15] which pointed out that television could produce effective instruction and that there was a need for more variety in programming. Furthermore, television held benefits for pre-school, primary and secondary education. The last mentioned was particularly important because the children of the 1950's "baby-boom" had just begun to enter secondary schools where there was a shortage of secondary trained teachers, and television could relieve the pressure in the science and mathematics area.

Certainly, television had its own educative effect on the whole of Australia, but as with mass radio, it is a one-way medium in its major use.[16] This issue brings us to the question of the proposed domestic satellite. Television and radio can now be received in most of Australia while telephone linkages remain particularly expensive in the most remote parts. A satellite would allow the rapid transmission of pictures or voices to any receiving station with little distortion. The satellite itself cannot influence the material being conveyed, other than through its cost. The computer adage "garbage in-garbage out" is quite applicable here. There are many possible configurations for the satellite use, some even allowing for low cost interaction between remote places where residents could determine their own use of the airspace. However, political and economic consideration suggest already that content of transmissions will be homogenised and "massified".[17] National networking of metropolitan or overseas programs will probably reduce the isolation of Australia's remote white residents. It will not beneficially affect their program choice, nor will it help in educating aboriginal people because of its white, mass, foreign orientation.

To what extent will the domestic satellite allow for personal interaction so vital for education? The history of educational provision in Australia to people in remote places has, with the notable exception of the School of the Air, been away from providing teachers to teach remote pupils personally and it has been towards the use of mass media in bring some teachers to pupils in an essentially non-intercommunicative system. Educators cannot

consider this trend to be a particularly good one. The tendency may be "useful" or "efficient" but not teacher orientated. The mass media educates but it does not teach in quite the same way that people do.

If the domestic satellite is to be used for teaching, then time must be allocated for two-way interactions, e.g., one-way vision and two-way voice or two-way vision and voice. The transmitting and receiving facilities for these modes are very expensive. There seems to be no willingness to devote time, energy or money in this direction and the final satellite result will probably enhance radio and telephone communication, while leaving pictures to national network television stations. Education will not receive much of an allocation, other than through the traditional television programs. The question remains then, how should effort to allocated to produce a satisfactory educational provision to children in remote place? It would be foolish not to proceed with satellite television but the money might be best spent by providing more teachers to remote places who can, by personal interaction, interpret the transmissions and become modern itinerants using aircraft, roads and citizen band radio as aids to teaching both black and white Australians.

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   A paper presented to the A.C.E. conference, Alice Springs and Darwin, May, 1981.

2. D. Bessant, 'Rural schooling and the rural myth in Australia',
   Comparative Education, vol. 154, no. 2, June 1978.

3. R. MacDonnell, Queensland, Report of the Board of General Education 1869, p. 8.

4. Chaired by Mr. Justice Lilley.

5. Queensland, Report with minutes of evidence of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Education Institutions, Queensland Parliamentary Papers, 1875, p. 208.

6. Officially called The Department of Public Instruction.

7. Daily Mail (Brisbane) 1 July 1915.

8. Other States adopted the system for general education as follows:
   N.S.W 1916
   Vic. 1916
   W.A. 1918
   Tas. 1919
   S.A. 1920
   Qld 1922
   see K.S. Cunningham, Primary Education By Correspondence, (Melb: M.U.P., 1931), p. 17.

9. Broadcasters fixed the receivers to tune only to certain stations. This allowed listeners only a limited range. The system failed because it was too clumsy and costly.

10. Daily Mail 1 June 1925.

11. Queensland Teachers' Journal 18 June 1918, p. 15.

12. Education Office Gazette (Qld), 3 February 1930, p. 21.

13. Formally established in 1932 by the Scullin Federal Government.
    See Australia, Report of the Education Broadcasts Advisory Committee, "The role of the A.B.C. in educational broadcasting", for a short history.

14. Report of the F.E.B.A.C., op. cit.

15. Australia, Report of the Advisory Committee on Educational Television Services to the Australian Broadcasting Control Board, (Weeden Report), (Hobart: A.G.P.S., 1964).

16. The introduction of teletext/teledon formats allows for some dual interaction, but cost and availability restrict usage.

17. C. Duke, "In receipt of learning?" a paper presented to the A.C.E. conference, Alice Springs and Darwin, May, 1981.